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DE RUEHBW #1123/01 3031528  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 291528Z OCT 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0585  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 001123

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#) [KV](#)  
SUBJECT: SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH PREPARES FOR ELECTION AS PATRIARCH  
PAVLE STEPS ASIDE

REFS: A) BELGRADE 600, B) 07 BELGRADE 1560, C) BELGRADE 904

#### Summary

1. (SBU) Following its October 24 meeting, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) announced that 94-year old Patriarch Pavle had submitted a request to relinquish his duties. If, as anticipated, the Holy Assembly of Bishops accepts the request at its upcoming meeting on November 11, church law proscribes election of a new Patriarch within 90 days. The installation of a new Patriarch while Pavle remains alive, while cause for consternation for some observers of the Church, is not unprecedented. The larger battle looms over who will succeed Pavle, as well as the impact that this choice would have upon the future of the Church and its role in society. End Summary.

#### Pavle Decides to Step Aside

2. (U) On October 24, the Holy Synod released a statement confirming days of media speculation that Patriarch Pavle, confined to his room at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade since November 2007, had requested to be relieved of his duties in accordance with Article 111 of the SOC Charter. Pavle reportedly cited his health as the reason for his desire to step down from his lifetime appointment.

3. (U) On October 24, the daily "Blic" published a detailed account of the request, including that Pavle signed the document in green ink and in the presence of members of the Synod. However, the decision by the Synod not to release the document publicly led to statements by Bishop Lavrentije of Sabac and others calling into doubt the authenticity of the document. In response, Bishop Amfilohije -- Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Coastlands -- who presides over the Synod and technically "runs" the Church in Pavle's absence, stated unequivocally on October 28 that Patriarch Pavle signed the request on October 8 in the presence of all members of the Synod and that Amfilohije, Bishop Hrizostom of Zic, Bishop Hrizostom of Bihac and Petrovac, and Bishop Filaret of Mileseva counter-signed the document.

4. (SBU) Some press reports also gave voice to concerns expressed by the conservative wing of the SOC, headed by Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren, with strong support from the "Bosnian lobby" (Ref A), about electing a new Patriarch while Pavle remained alive. The majority of bishops, however, appear to be comfortable with proceeding to a new election, frequently citing in interviews the cases of the first Serbian Archbishop Sveti Sava, Patriarch Jefrem in the 14th century, and the circumstances under which Pavle became Patriarch in 1990 after doctors ruled that his predecessor German was unable to carry out his duties. Dragan Makojevic, director of the SOC charitable fund Philanthropy, told us on October 27 that he does not believe that this is an issue of critical importance.

New Patriarch as Early as November 11

¶5. (U) In the event that the Holy Synod accepts Patriarch's Pavle resignation at its November 11 meeting, it can proceed directly with the election of a new Patriarch or it can delay a vote for up to 90 days. In addition to the likelihood that members of the Assembly will raise the circumstances of Pavle's request, there is speculation that the complicated election process (Ref B), in which only full bishops have the right to vote and the final choice among the three candidates selected by the bishops is a blind draw, may come under challenge.

¶6. (SBU) Because there are several other issues, including the "frozen conflict" between Bishop Artemije and Bishop Teodosije (Ref C), that may require the attention of the Synod, most observers, including Makojevic and religion analyst Zivica Tucic, believe that it is not possible to predict at this time when the election would take place.

#### Possible Heirs to the Throne -----

¶7. (SBU) As many as 10 names figure prominently in press reports about a possible successor to Pavle, including several that surfaced in November 2007 after Patriarch Pavle entered the hospital and again in May 2008 during the last meeting of the Holy Synod (Refs A and B).

¶8. (SBU) The front-runner at this time appears to remain Metropolitan Amfilohije, due to his role in the day-to-day activities of the Church. Some analysts, however, believe that his chances were greater under the government led by former Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. Two other highly influential bishops -- Bishop Irinej of Backa and Bishop Hrizostom of Zic - also are considered serious candidates from the old guard. Irinej, praised

BELGRADE 00001123 002 OF 002

for his role in introducing religious studies in schools in 2001 but criticized for his candid stance on internal church affairs, served as an unofficial adviser to both former President Milosevic and former Prime Minister Djindjic. Hrizostom studied theology in the U.S. and headed Hilandar, the Serbian monastery on Mount Athos, for 20 years.

¶9. (SBU) A second group of potential su#[QmBw} this group, which includes Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje and Herzegovina, Bishop Fotije of Dalmatia, Bishop Joanikije of Budem and Niksic, and Bishop Ignatije of Pozarevac and Branicevo. Perhaps the best known of this group is Grigorije, who in 2006 called on the Hague indictees to surrender and whom Prime Minister Dodik reportedly supports openly.

¶10. (SBU) Given the current divisions within the SOC, some observers believe that a compromise choice may emerge if the factions that support candidates from the youth movement or the old guard fail to agree. Seventy-eight-year old Bishop Irinej of Nis, vicar to Patriarch German, and Bishop Jefrem of Banja Luka, who likely would enjoy support of the "Bosnian lobby," are seen as potential compromise candidates.

#### Comment -----

¶11. (SBU) After a long period of uncertainty and at times paralysis due to the prolonged illness that sidelined Patriarch Pavle, it appears that the Serbian Orthodox Church is finally moving to resolve the situation. The election of a new Patriarch, and the extent to which the process exacerbates existing tensions or unifies the Church, will determine whether the Church will be able to play a positive role for reconciliation in society or will be perceived as a divided and backward-looking institution. End Comment.

MUNTER